

Chapter 17: The three prisoners

Gavin woke up with a start. Water dripped on his face. He felt cold and stiff.

‘Crikey’ he thought. ‘I must have fallen asleep. I must have been here for hours.’

He hurriedly looked around, and then squinted up at the darkening sky. Raindrops plopped slowly on to his anorak and then increased until it began to rain steadily. He had been lying in a little clearing at the edge of the woods.

‘Why, it’s evening!’ he said in surprise. ‘I must have been more tired than I thought. I expect it’s because I was too excited to sleep properly when I was in the castle last night.’

He chuckled to himself. His luck was certainly in. Any of the Clan could have bumped right into him, lying there asleep like that.

He looked back towards the house, now a dark shadow against the overcast sky. But there was something odd about it, he thought. There wasn’t a light on. Not one. Normally a light would twinkle from the kitchen or Uncle Fergus’s study. But now all was dark.

‘Odd,’ thought Gavin. ‘Perhaps they’ve had a power cut.’

He walked slowly towards the house. Then he remembered. Aunt Elspeth had left to go into town. That would explain her absence. Uncle Fergus might still be out for his walk. He quickened his steps and pushed open the front door.

The hall was in darkness. He found the light switch and flicked it on. Nothing happened. He felt his way along the corridor to the kitchen door and tried to push it open.

It was shut tight. Gavin gave it a hard push. It seemed locked.

How strange. 'Betty! Betty!' he called out, his voice echoing in the dark house.

Then through the shut kitchen door he thought he heard a slight sound, like a whimper. Gavin began to get frightened. He felt his way along the corridor again towards Uncle Fergus's room. He called out: 'Uncle Fergus-s-s-s!'

Still there was not a sound, except the scrape of Gavin's boots as he felt his way along the wall.

Then a hand fastened itself over his mouth, and another grabbed him by the waist and threw him to the floor, pinning him to the ground.



Gavin nearly fainted. The hot hand slapped across his mouth made his heart leap into his throat, and for a moment he thought he was going to die of fright.

Clearly no ghost had grabbed him. It was a man. He could feel his clothes with his hand, and his knee on his legs where he was pinned to the floor.

Then he had an idea. He bit the hand across his mouth with all his might. A man's voice swore, and for a moment Gavin was free.

He shouted: 'Help! Help!' at the top of his voice, twisted on the floor and got loose. He kicked out and the hard toe of his climbing boots encountered human flesh. There was another outburst of swearing.

'Uncle Fergus! Uncle Fergus!' bellowed Gavin again, as he desperately tried to run for the door.

'It's a kid,' said a voice.

'Get him! Get him, before he gets out, Willie! Get to the door, you fool!'

Gavin crouched low in the darkened hall. His eyes were becoming used to the dark and he thought he saw the shadows of the two men.

'Do you see him?'

'Nah. Work towards the door,' said the second voice. 'He can't get out of this room. Keep an eye on the stairs.'

Gavin crouched still, remembering Mot's advice about stillness being the best help to being unseen. The dark figures moved slowly towards him.

'Hi! Hi! Kid!' said a voice. Gavin stayed silent and motionless. 'We won't hurt you. You're only making it worse for yourself. Give yourself up, and I promise you won't get hurt.'

Still Gavin stayed quiet.

'Okay, kid,' said the voice. 'Play it the hard way, if you like. Move up here wi' me, Pete. He's at the top end somewhere.'

Gavin waited for a moment, and thought desperately. They must be burglars. After the silver. Perhaps Betty was tied up in the kitchen. Uncle Fergus must be out of the house, or he was their prisoner, or worse. He gulped. He must get out of the house and raise the alarm.

Summoning up his courage, he made a dash for what was the front door and crashed head over heels over a large object. He had fallen over the hall chair. He lay dazed for a moment.

Before he could move, huge hands grabbed him again. This time there was no escape.

'I've got him,' said a voice triumphantly.

'Good man, Pete,' said the other. 'Bring him upstairs. Keep him quiet. There's been enough noise in here already'.

The hands lifted Gavin, as a terrier lifts a rat, by the scruff of the neck and shook him.

'Listen you,' said the voice of the one called Pete, 'if you promise to keep quiet, I'll let your mouth go. But if you struggle or shout out again, then I'll punch you silly and gag you.' He shook Gavin again until his head swam. 'Nod your head, if you agree.'

Hurriedly, Gavin nodded. The hand released his mouth. He sucked in breath hurriedly.

'Come with us,' said the voice. They tugged Gavin through the dark hall and up the stairs to the first floor. They seemed to be heading for Uncle Fergus's room. Once or twice one of the men stumbled and swore. They didn't seem to be familiar with the house.

'Where is it, Pete?' said one voice.

'This is it. It's the one at the end. I can see Cobra's light.'

Gavin peered ahead as he was manhandled along the passage. Sure enough, there was a faint glimmer of light from under Uncle Fergus's door. One of the men rapped on the door.

'It's us, Cobra. Open the door. We've got a kid. It's the one who lives in the house.'

'Okay, I'm opening up,' said a voice from inside the room.

The men bundled Gavin into the room and he stared around. Uncle Fergus was sitting bound and gagged in a chair.

'Uncle!' he cried, and started forward.

'Oh, no you don't!' said the man called Pete and grabbed him by the arms. Gavin wondered if he should kick out again, then decided against it.

He gave a quick glance around the room. The windows were closed and shuttered, and the room was lit by a small hand lamp set on Uncle Fergus's desk. Uncle Fergus sat still, but one of his eyelids winked twice at Gavin as if to reassure him.

Two men stood by the desk. They were wearing masks over the lower parts of their faces, with a hole cut for the mouth.

One was tall and thin, with a narrow face rather like a snake. Gavin could see why the others called him Cobra. Even with a mask, he looked snake-like. The other man was smaller. So far he had not spoken.

'What's your name?' asked Cobra.

'Gavin.'

Cobra was silent for a moment. Then he turned to the other two. 'Give you a bit of trouble, did he?' The two men shuffled sheepishly. 'Did he make any noise?' Cobra asked.

'Nah. We grabbed him in the hall. He tried to bolt out the door,' said Pete.

Gavin studied the men. He would try and remember them all later.

All four looked about twenty-five, he thought, but two might

be older. They wore old clothes, but the small man beside Uncle Fergus's chair wore overalls. They looked dirty and down at heel, as if they had lived rough. They also looked rather frightening with their masks and truculent air.

Cobra spoke again: 'Sit in that chair, kid, and keep your mouth shut. Pete, stand behind him. If he makes a sound, hit him hard.'

Gavin sat down, very quietly, on the nearest chair. Pete stood beside him.

'Willie!' said Cobra. 'Check the windows. Make sure no light will show outside.'

Willie examined the windows and heavy curtains. 'All secure, boss,' he said.

'Right,' said Cobra. 'Turn up the lamp a little.'

Willie moved to the table and gave the handle on the lamp a few twists. The room lightened.

All this time, Uncle Fergus had sat quite still, but his eyes looked anxious, except when they caught Gavin's. Then he tried to wink reassuringly.

Cobra was clearly boss, Gavin thought. He gave all the orders.

Cobra spoke again. 'Alex, go down to the kitchen. Check that the maid is still tied up. Check the front door and all downstairs windows. Lock the lot. Don't lock the back door, but fasten it tightly from the inside.'

'Okay, Cobra,' said the man called Alex.

'One other thing,' said Cobra. 'Stay at the front windows. Anywhere you like, but don't be seen. If there's the slightest sign of any danger, warn us.'

Alex nodded. Cobra spoke again.

'Have a quick squint outside before you lock up. See if our light shows outside. It shouldn't with both shutters and curtains up, but we must be certain. Come back and tell me before you settle down at the front.'

Alex nodded to all these instructions and left.

Pete continued to stand guard beside Gavin, and Willie stood beside Uncle Fergus. Cobra continued to question Gavin.

'Are you the only person in the house?' Gavin nodded.

Cobra turned to Uncle Fergus. 'I want some answers from you. If I think you're lying, the kid gets it. Do you understand?'

Uncle Fergus nodded slowly.

'And another thing,' said Cobra. 'One of us will be standing beside the boy all the time. Make any trouble and we clobber him.'

He produced a knife from his pocket, pressed a small switch and a long blade flicked out. Gavin gasped.

Cobra smiled slowly. It was not a pleasant smile. 'You get the idea, kid?' he said ... then looked at Uncle Fergus, 'You too, pal?'

Uncle Fergus nodded.

'Okay,' said Cobra. 'Take his gag off. But make sure he's still tied up.'

Willie checked the ropes which held Uncle Fergus tightly to the chair. 'It's all right, Cobra. He'll no' move from that.'

'Right then,' said Cobra. 'Let's get down to business. We're wasting time.'

He pulled a chair forward and sat down. There was a moment of silence while he pulled a cigarette from his pocket and lit it. Before he could speak, there came a tap at the door.

'It's me, lads,' said Alex's voice. Willie opened the door.

Alex stuck his head round. 'It's all right boss. The lassie in the kitchen's still tied up and not uttering a sound. I waved a kitchen knife in front of her just to show who's boss. I think she fainted. Anyhow, she can't move and can't speak.'

He grinned. 'Your light can't be seen from the outside. Not a chink,' he told Cobra.

'Thanks,' said Cobra. 'Get back to the front of the house. Keep watch! I'll send Willie along when we're ready to blow.' Alex disappeared out the door.

Cobra turned to the others. 'Take his gag off,' he told Pete.

Pete bent over Uncle Fergus and removed the scarf which had been used as a gag. Uncle Fergus moved his lips around and swallowed once or twice, as he tried to get rid of the feel of the gag.

'Are you and the kid the only people in the house, other than that woman?' he asked Uncle Fergus.

'Yes,' said Uncle Fergus, and coughed as his dry throat made him choke a little. He coughed again, then said: 'Look, I don't know what you want, but there's no money in this house. You'll never get away with breaking in here. There's a party of people due here this evening, so you'd better clear out quickly while you've still got the chance.'

Cobra smiled his unpleasant smile.

'Who are you trying to kid?' he said. 'We've been watching this house for weeks. There's only yourself, your wife and the home-help. She's tied up, and your wife stays in Stirling every Thursday night. We haven't spent hours watching you for nothing. We've seen this kid staying here. Who's he, anyway?'

'My nephew ... on holiday,' said Uncle Fergus. 'Leave him out of it. Can't you let him go?'

'He stays here,' said Cobra. 'And don't give me all that rubbish about no money in the house. You've got silver here. You've had it here for weeks. I know most of it is here at the moment, because we've watched your journeys into town.'

'Some of that stuff is priceless,' he went on. 'It's in this house somewhere and I'm going to find out where. And you're going to tell us.' He moved over to Uncle Fergus's chair and stood in front of him.