

# THE FIRE TREE

## CHAPTER 1

Janine stumbled and fell, for a second time, cursing her clumsiness under her breath. She quickly looked back over her shoulder, to see if the men who were chasing her were within sight. They weren't. She could, nonetheless, still hear them crashing through the undergrowth, far too close for comfort.

She hadn't trusted the men from the moment she had seen them on the road. Their mock friendliness had put her on her guard, straight away, and the way the two younger men kept looking her up and down, had made her flesh crawl.

The ground was treacherous. The trees and bushes had given way to thick, long grass, strewn with ferns and nettles. Sharp outcrops of rocks made the going even worse, rearing up at intervals, each with an apron of gravel at the base of their downhill side. As the terrain got steeper, the ferns grew darker and sharper and more reluctant to let her fight her way through them. They tugged at her dress, snagged her shawl and scratched her legs until they stung and bled.

Suddenly, her legs slipped from under her and she fell. She hurriedly got back to her feet and set off again, ignoring the pain in her leg. She was nimble and speedy when she wasn't making clumsy mistakes with her feet. Her heart was pounding like a hammer on an anvil in her chest and she could feel her pulse in her neck.

Suddenly, as she reached the top of the rise, there was a shout from behind her. One of the men had spotted her. Her heart almost broke with dismay and she began to cry. She had promised herself that she wouldn't, but she couldn't stop herself.

Janine crossed the top of the ridge and began to run down the slope at the opposite side. The incline stretched below her, the vegetation sparser, but still cluttered with swathes of ferns and nettles. Her feet refused to keep connection with the ground hidden beneath the greenery. At times, she sank deep into the hidden gullies, causing her to stagger wildly. She swayed and lurched, but managed to keep her feet. Hot tears began to stream down her face. She whimpered and, then, hearing the sound of her own distress in her ears, she growled with annoyance.

All at once, she was filled with embarrassment. Embarrassment that she would be letting her mother down by behaving in this way.

"Feeling fear will harm your chances," Her mother used to say, "But showing fear will damn them."

Her mother wasn't like she should have been. She was prouder than an impoverished crofter's wife should be. She was more graceful and – although she did her best to hide it – she was strangely refined.

Her mother had observed and passed on to her some customs that were novel or uncommon and others that were known, but had fallen into disrepute.

Janine's Uncle had once said that there were rumours that, "back in the day", there had been witches among their family. She recalled that her father, on hearing those words, had leapt at him and pushed him to the ground. They had struggled and scuffled and Janine had instinctively known - even as a small child - that this wasn't the normal "play fighting" they sometimes did.

Her father had been sullen and distant for some time, after that. He had told her that her mother's family had fallen on hard times. He said that the Laird of their region had supported the wrong side against the king and that the Laird's land and holdings had been seized and given to a neighbouring "loyal" Laird. Her father said that arguing about this was what the fight had been about. Janine knew - for no reason she could quite explain - that this was not the true reason for the conflict.

This new Laird had treated the 'small folk' cruelly. He had forced most of them off the land, dispossessing them. Some of them had starved to death. They had resorted, in the end, to eating leaves and grass. They had died with bloated bellies and hollow, sunken eyes.

Janine flinched at the thought and shook herself back to reality. She needed to keep her wits about her. She needed to think. She needed to survive. The men chasing her would likely beat her savagely and then rape her, if they caught her. They would also likely kill her to stop her talking.

She had picked up a sheep trail, but it was dangerous footing and the undergrowth brushed against her from both sides. She hurriedly clambered over some fallen logs and almost slipped, again. She recovered her balance and then almost tripped over some roots growing out from a nearby tree. She managed to stay upright and the path ahead of her became more distinct and she put on a burst of speed.

She heard a noise to her left, in the bushes, and desperately hoped that it was just an animal - a boar or a deer she had frightened - and not a person. She ran faster, but the noise kept pace with her. After a couple of minutes, she reached a clearing where the path widened out and, breathless and panting, she stopped for a moment by the gnarled, moss-covered trunk of an old tree.

She subconsciously twiddled her mother's ring on her finger, something she did often when she was nervous. The ring was all she had from her mother, who had died when she was small. They had been poor crofters, breaking their backs to make ends meet. They had always struggled. Money had always been either very short or completely non-existent. The ring, however, was strangely intricate and meticulously worked. An odd possession for people of such humble means.

She looked all around her. There was nobody there. She was aware that it was dangerous to tarry. Still breathing hard, she straightened, in readiness to set off, again. A second later, the youngest of her pursuers - the man with the mean, narrow lips - jumped out into her path.

"If you hadn't run," he said, gasping for breath, to tell his lie, "We might not have ended up hurting you." He leered at her, then added: "But now....". He let the sentence hang in the air, menacingly, and shook his head, sadly, in an evil parody of regret.

"Please!", she cried, "I haven't done anything!"

This appeared to amuse him.

"No?", he asked, still panting heavily from his exertions.

"I've done nothing to you at all!", she insisted.

The man's mean, narrow lips contorted into a mocking smile, "Then you have nothing to worry about. Do you?", he said and laughed a disgusting laugh.

Behind her, Janine could hear the approach of the man's companions in the distance. Her heart sank. The man started to approach her, stepping slowly and with exaggerated care, as if he were trying not to frighten a horse he wanted to harness.

Janine took a step backwards, away from him. Her foot shifted on a stone and she fell to the side, automatically reaching out to steady herself against the nearby tree. As she did so, something sharply spiked sank deep into the palm of her hand. She winced and cried out in pain. The man hesitated in his advance for a moment.

Somewhere in her head, clearly and distinctly, Janine heard the sound of bells. Tiny bells that tinkled softly. Their sound peculiarly comforting. The noise they made was like a wind chime caught in an unexpected breeze.

Janine's cry of pain stopped abruptly, remaining incomplete. She stood to her full height. The sensation in her hand was completely gone. Slowly and deliberately she turned her gaze from the trunk of the tree to meet the man's eyes.

The man froze. He stared at her as if he hadn't seen her before. His eyes widened. Whatever he saw unquestionably made him afraid. His eyes shot over her shoulder, scanning the distant foliage, vainly seeking the reassurance of his friends' approach.

With a fluid movement, Janine dropped into a stoop and picked up a long, thick length of stout wood with a jagged point at the end. She then slipped into what the man immediately recognised as a fighting stance.

The man stared in open-mouthed disbelief. A question was writ unmistakably on his face: "When had this weak and defenceless girl suddenly become dangerous?"

In a single second, as she struck, the man's expression turned from fear to terror. The wood came up towards him, at lightning speed, striking him under

his chin. Janine lunged her weight onto her forward foot and the spiked end of the wood pierced up through his jaw and into his mouth. Blood gushed from his lips and he made a gargled sound of surprise.

Janine reached and firmly arranged her grip on the shaft of the pole. Then, gracefully repositioning her feet, like an elegant dancer, she crouched slightly to bear the force of her next move. Leaning forward into the motion, she lifted the end of the makeshift weapon upwards, raising the man off his feet and suspending him in the air, impaled and writhing in pain.

The man with the mean, narrow lips gave a shrill, ear splitting cry of agony that rose higher and higher. As the spiked end of the pole penetrated the roof of his mouth and plunged into his brain, his cry peaked and then trailed mournfully away, echoing through the forest.

Behind her, the two men making their way through the bushes, in her direction, instantly halted in unison. They exchanged wide-eyed looks of horror, the blood curdling scream still ringing in their ears. Fear, like fingers of ice, climbed up their spines. They shuddered.

After a fleeting moment of hesitation, without exchanging a word, the two men took off as fast as their legs would carry them. They ran with a frantic desperation. They ran in the opposite direction. They ran away from Janine. The primitive instinct of 'fight or flight' told them to put as much distance between them and her as quickly as possible.